



Living with Coyote



Believe it or not, many of us live around coyotes on a daily basis. Secret and elusive, these animals have learned to exist right next to us without detection. In fact, coyotes have learned to thrive in both urban and rural areas with great success. Once found largely in the arid regions of the western United States, they have expanded their range in the last 100 years throughout every state (except Hawaii), every Canadian province, throughout Mexico, and into Central America. Three factors greatly helped the coyote expand its range: removal of timber wolves, expansion of human development, and fragmentation of the once vast woodland areas of the eastern and southeastern United States. Another minor factor producing local range expansions is the practice of transporting and releasing live-trapped coyotes into "chase pens". Coyotes often escape these pens, and may even be released as the pens are abandoned.

Coyote Biology

Unlike domestic dogs, coyotes breed only once per year, usually January or February. After a gestation period of approximately 9 weeks, female coyotes give birth to an average litter of 5 to 7 pups. Litter sizes up to 13 pups have been reported; however, it is theorized that litter size may be directly related to food availability and local coyote population density. A mated pair of coyotes becomes very territorial, and they aggressively defend a home range around a den site that the pregnant female has picked out. Pups may be born anytime from late March through May. Also unlike domestic dogs, the male coyote is an excellent parent, and for the first few weeks after birth of his pups, he provides food to both the nursing female and the young pups after they have been weaned. Although they are capable of breeding at one year old, it is not uncommon for young female coyotes to remain with their parents for at least one year, and they help their mother raise a new litter of pups. After about 2 months the pups emerge from the den and are ready to follow their parents on short trips.

Interbreeding between coyotes and domestic dogs is rare, but it has been reported, and "coydogs" have been produced. These genetically-mixed offspring may or may not be fertile.

Coyote Predation

The degree to which coyotes cause problems varies greatly by location, by season, and by individual coyote. In rural areas, complaints mainly consist of livestock and agricultural damage. Coyotes are omnivores, typically eating anything they believe might be nutritious. Livestock damage varies from chickens and turkeys up to pigs, goats, and calves. In urban areas coyotes regularly prey on small domestic dogs and cats. Although unusual, coyotes may become bold enough to attack young children, and several such incidents have been reported in various states. They may regularly raid neighborhood garbage cans.

In the wild, coyotes subsist on small mammals, birds, deer fawns, wild turkeys, rabbits, and waterfowl. They regularly feed on road-killed wildlife, and carrion is a favorite meal. Agricultural crops such as watermelons, strawberries, and sweet corn are commonly eaten by coyotes.

Livestock Predation

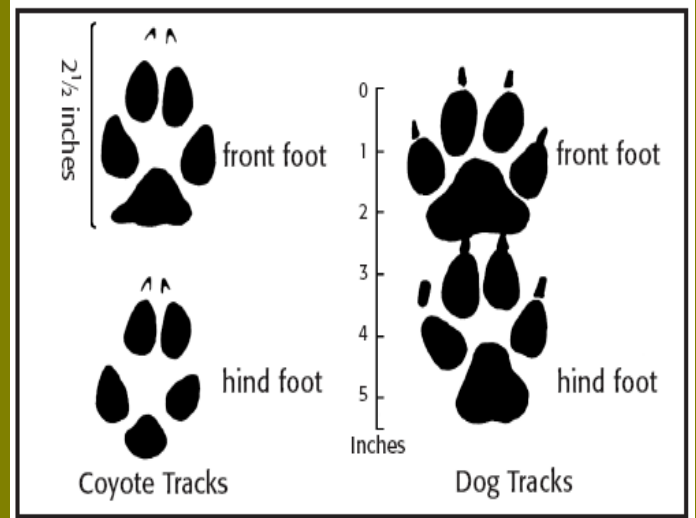
Coyotes began appearing in Louisiana in the early 1950's when farmers and loggers undertook large-scale clearing of wooded acreages for mechanized agriculture and timber harvesting. Even then they weren't widely recognized as coyotes, and reports of "wolves" in northern Louisiana were common. Southwestern Louisiana had always been home to the native red wolf, and misidentification of coyotes was common. Invading coyotes have so interbred with the red wolf that today the pure red wolf genetic pool may have disappeared. The expansion of human population also introduced calves, chickens, sheep and other livestock and poultry which quickly became easy prey for coyotes. Coyotes thrived on a bountiful plate provided by man.

In areas where livestock is common today, coyotes usually get the blame for the majority of depredation cases. However, domestic free roaming dogs are much more likely to be the culprits, especially in areas of human population.

Coyotes typically attack a larger prey animal around the head and neck, generally attempting to crush the skull or crush the windpipe causing asphyxiation. Domestic dogs typically attack around the flank or hind quarters, attempting to drag the prey animal down to the ground. Coyotes leave very obvious identifiable bite and puncture marks on their prey, while domestic and feral dogs tear and slash at the prey animal.

Coyotes and feral dogs are not the only predators of livestock. Bobcats, red and grey foxes, minks, and raccoons will also prey on livestock and poultry. Problem areas should be investigated by an experienced animal depredation specialist. The USDA Wildlife Services section will work with landowners and producers who have depredation problems. The LA. Dept. of Wildlife & Fisheries also maintains a list of active nuisance animal trappers. Learning the specific signs of coyote predation will help a producer take the appropriate actions to end the problem. Exclusion and electric fencing, guard dogs, and trapping can help reduce coyote problems.

There may not be a quick solution to coyote predation on livestock. Certain individual coyotes are more prone to prey on livestock, and removal of the offending animal may stop the problem. Coyotes (and other predators) are also more prone to livestock predation when they have young to feed (springtime) or when they are teaching their young how to hunt (summer). The USDA has spent millions of dollars and decades of trapping, poisoning, and even aerial gunning to control coyote predation, yet the coyote population continues to increase throughout North America.



Coyotes in the Suburbs

As a result of their dramatic range expansion, individual coyotes are now appearing in very unusual places. The photo at right shows a coyote sleeping on public transportation, a decidedly urban location. These adaptable animals are making their homes right next to ours. Urban expansion into wild natural areas will continue to cause coyote:human interaction problems. Disappearing pets and scattered garbage cans are signs that coyotes have found easy meals in our backyards. Some common sense and preventative measures on our part will produce fewer problems. Closely watch or kennel small pets when outside. Remove leftover pet food after feeding. Keep brush and weeds well controlled. If pet food is stored outside, place it in a sealable container. Keep smaller pets in a fenced area, and never chain or tie up small dogs.



Install a “doggie-door” in the back door of your home so that smaller pets will have an escape route. Check to make sure that perimeter fences are intact with no holes which a coyote could slip through. Coyotes are largely nocturnal when roaming our neighborhoods, so keep pets inside at night. Don’t leave trash at the curbside overnight. Coyotes are very smart animals, and they are always looking for an easy meal.

Coyote attacks on humans are extremely rare, but they have occurred. Never allow very small children to play alone especially at dusk in areas where coyotes are present. As with all wildlife, never intentionally feed coyotes. Interactions between coyotes and humans will increase as both our population numbers expand, and it is up to us to be the smarter one in this interaction.



Wildlife Concerns

As mentioned earlier, coyotes prey on small mammals such as mice, rats, rabbits, and squirrels. But they have also been shown to be a predator on deer and fawns, turkeys, and waterfowl. The Quality Deer Management Association has sponsored several research projects which indicate that intensive coyote (and other predator) removal just prior to fawning season will dramatically increase fawn survival rates, thus improving annual recruitment into the local deer herd. However, it should be emphasized that coyote control is an extremely labor intensive project, and fully 75% of the local coyote population must be removed to have a serious impact on their population. Weekend trapping and shooting a few coyotes during deer season will not begin to control a coyote population.

Many Louisiana hunters are concerned that coyotes are having a negative effect on their deer herd and rabbit populations. In reality, coyotes seem to have filled a niche left over from the removal of wolves and cougars. Despite increasing coyote numbers statewide, the Louisiana deer population is very healthy. There may be very localized deer herds whose growth is negatively impacted by coyote predation, but these situations can generally be remedied by habitat improvements, not intensive coyote removal. Hunters should also recognize that deer fawns are regularly killed by bobcats and dogs. Wholesale removal of coyotes is only addressing a portion of the issue.



Coyote at bait site



Coyote with fawn leg



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